

## **Erie Canal, Importance of the**

As we all know, the original pioneers for inland and western United States came from the colonies spread along the Atlantic seaboard. Transportation networks then were all but non-existent, being restricted to the immediate coast and the rivers and streams large enough to handle shallow draft vessels. From 1620 until 1825 this situation did not greatly improve.

From the very beginning of human habitation in Colebrook and the surrounding towns, the population was restless; the surviving documents are full of references of citizens being helped financially by town funds to relocate, often to New York State. Colebrook's first resident left town and moved northward a few short months after building his log house just north of the Winchester town line on Smith Hill. This was ten years before the outbreak of hostilities that led to the American War of Independence.

Seth Hurd, the first settler to the upland known as Beech Hill, arrived in 1786 and remained until 1806, when he pulled up stakes and moved to the newly opened region that was to become the State of Ohio. Seth went by ox cart, and the journey took well over a month, with the cost equaling the amount he had derived from the sale of all his Colebrook property, something over \$1,000, which left him to begin life all over with no money or cash reserve. Somehow, he persevered, as we know that he left descendents who still live in northeastern Ohio.

The North family of Colebrook produced several sons who, upon receiving a basic knowledge of the skills needed to be a successful pioneer, left for northern and western New York State. Enos North pioneered to Genesee County, New York. His location in Genesee County was seven miles south of Batavia, and twenty-three miles south of the then under construction Erie Canal. Shortly after arriving, he wrote a letter back home in 1824 in which he describes clearing forest and creating farmland. Transportation was difficult, and commerce was almost non-existent. In his correspondence he advises his younger brother back in Colebrook, who is a peddler during the warm months, what to bring with him next year. He hopes to sell whatever he can carry with him, and thus has to make important guesses as to what commodities will bring the most profit.

After the opening of the canal, a letter contains the following information, huge in its implications from our vantage point nearly two hundred years later:

“It is no longer necessary to send someone to accompany their merchandise on the long trip to western New York State, as goods consigned to the agents of the canal in Albany were perfectly safe and secure, and would arrive in any designated port along the way exactly the way they had been shipped”. Today we hardly give a second thought when sending a package by any of the several carriers available to us, but what happened with the Erie Canal was a truly landmark event.

The Erie Canal was the brainchild of New York State Governor DeWitt Clinton, a giant of a man alongside the likes of Washington, Jefferson and Franklin. It was his vision of a transportation system that would not only transform New York, but the entire nation. The growth rate of the western states would have taken an infinitely longer time had it not been for

this waterway connecting the port of New York with a cheap, safe route to the Great Lakes, down the St. Lawrence, and connecting with the Ohio, Mississippi and Missouri Rivers.

1817 marked the beginning of construction of the canal, which culminated with its completion at Tonawanda, on the Niagara River downstream from Buffalo on October 26, 1825. The builders had created one of the greatest engineering works of modern time; it is ten times as long as the Panama Canal at 340 miles and with its smaller branches constituted the world's greatest waterway system..

Leaving the opening years of the Erie Canal, Colebrook records next comment upon it by means of correspondence written by one of the teen-aged Rockwell girls in 1850, when she visited family and friends in northern Ohio. She went from Colebrook to Albany by stagecoach, a trip that took a full day. From there they went to Schenectady by a train having 7 cars; at one time they went 7 miles in 15 minutes. That off-hand comment contains the reason for the future demise of the American canal system; they couldn't compete with either the time schedule or the amount of cargo carried by the railroads.

The Rockwell party boarded a canal packet vessel named the *U.S. Capt. Cook* for Utica, with 28 passengers. At Utica they changed to another stage for Syracuse, which they reached two and a half days later. Continuing on in a series of stage coaches, they passed through Lockport, which, she said, contained the greatest curiosities that they had seen. "The double row of locks, built one above another with their white gates making a very neat and handsome appearance. A boat was passing through when we were there. The canal for 3 miles above is cut through solid rock. There is a large and flourishing village on the canal."

At Buffalo they went aboard the steamer *Henry Clay*, which carried them across Lake Erie to Fairport, Ohio, where they proceeded via stage to their relatives.

The author commented that the cabins of steam and canal boats are miserable places at night and a person needed nerves of iron or a large pile of opium in order to sleep.

The return journey began with an eighteen-hour voyage across the lake to Buffalo, then a 200 mile ride by stage over deplorable roads to Schenectady. As they passed along the banks of the Mohawk River, she commented on the canal boats passing leisurely along through the beautiful meadows. Between Schenectady and Albany they travelled by rail coach (a train drawn by horsepower). From there to New York City the journey continued by steamship.

The original canal was 4 feet deep and 40 feet wide, and floated boats carrying 30 tons of freight; over the next hundred years the canal was enlarged and the capacity of the vessels traversing the Erie Canal increased to a maximum of 1,600 tons.

The economic significance of this canal system launched New York far ahead of her former rivals, Boston and Philadelphia. Massachusetts, in 1825, had been on an economic par with New York, but sixteen years later, its exports were only 1/3 of New York's; Philadelphia, once the nation's leading seaport, fell to a distant second. New York never relinquished her position of dominance; today she remains one of the world's great centers of economics and culture with a vast hinterland encompassing not only New York State, but the majority of Connecticut and New Jersey as well.

Destinations of Colebrook pioneers.

